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# LETTER

FROM A

GENTLEMAN to his FRIEND, &c.



[ Price SIX-PENCE. ]



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Concerning the CUSTOM of

GIVING AND TAKING

V A I L S.

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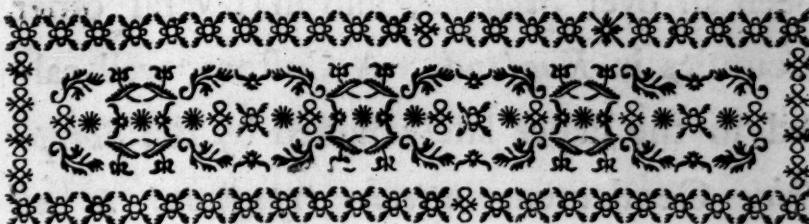
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MDCCLXVII.





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## LETTER

FROM A

GENTLEMAN to his FRIEND,

Concerning the CUSTOM of

Giving and taking Vails.

DEAR SIR,

Nov. 30, 1766.

T is with great Pleasure I have  
 heard that the Custom of giving  
 and taking Vails is to be abo-  
 lished in the Counties of *Salop* and *Staf-*  
*ford* at *Christmas* next, as it hath already

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been

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been all over *Scotland*, and in several other Counties in *England*. A Custom, well called in the Paper lately signed by the *Shropshire Gentlemen*, *utterly repugnant to all the Rules of Decorum, and Hospitality*; and, permit me to add, a Custom which has already spoiled nine out of ten Servants throughout the Kingdom, as well as destroyed that reciprocal Relation between Master and Servant, which is instituted by an Authority more than human.

THAT these, and more than these, are the pernicious Consequences of the Practice of Vail-giving, I hope to prove with the clearest Demonstration.

And first, that this Custom is repugnant to all Decorum, how many Masters of Families have secretly felt in their own Breasts when following their Guests to the Door, they have seen them before their Faces

first step to this Side, then to the other, through a Lane of greedy, cringing Harpies, who stand with half open Fists to receive all that shall be slipt into them, and perhaps a Shilling or an Half Crown drops through the Fingers and rolls about the Hall, to the additional Confusion of the good Man of the House. It is true, Custom may have so far familiarized this Practice, that in some Masters (who have a pretty good Front) there may not even be an aukward Sensation when they behold their Guests contributing towards the Maintenance of their Household, and paying the Shot as regularly, though generally at a much higher Rate, than if they had dined at a Tavern or an Inn; yet, as it often happens, that for want of knowing what Number of Servants will stand at the Door, *Ladies* and *Gentlemen* when they dine out with their good Friends cannot exactly calculate how much *per Head* the

Ordinary will come to, and so when they go away are often at a loss for Change, or cannot readily fumble out a Shilling or Half a Crown for every Footman, without which, however ill they can afford it, they must expect to be most heartily abused; therefore, for the remedying of this Evil among such as are still resolved to give and suffer Vails to be taken, I would propose three Methods, leaving it to the Discretion of every one to adopt which ever he thinks best.

*First,* Let the Gentleman or Lady of the House, instead of suffering their Servants to receive their Visiters' Money for their Repast, fix the Price of the Ordinary, and let the Price so fixed be hung up in the most conspicuous Place of the dining Parlour, or Hall, as is done at *Buxton*, *Matlock*, and other Places where People pay for what they have, that so each

Guest

Guest may always know how much the Reckoning will come to without further Trouble; and Persons of small Fortune will by this Means be better able to judge how often they can afford to accept an Invitation to dinner at any intimate Friend's House, without starving their own Families through what they subscribe towards the Payment of the Servants Wages: Then, immediately as Dinner is over, let the good Lady of the House order a Plate to be set in the Middle of the Table, into which let each Stranger put Half a Crown for the Butler, and a Shilling or two, according to the Price fixed for each of the Men in Livery; which in effect is the very same Thing, and will answer the very same End (*viz.* in helping to pay the Servants Wages) as if it was given at the Door, whilst it would not be at all more inconsistent with Decorum, and would be attended with much less Trouble

than

than the present Practice of paying the Servants one by one.

*Secondly,* If this Scheme should be disapproved, a large Box might be put up in the banqueting Room, of the Nature of those we may have seen for Christmas-Boxes in Coffee-houses, in which every Person who comes to the House may put whatsoever he thinks proper; by which means, as it will not be seen what each contributes, a worthy Friend in low Circumstances may come off at a much cheaper Rate (and by the bye without being abus'd as a niggardly Dog) than he possibly can, according to the present Custom.—Besides, here would be a peculiar Convenience resulting to the Lady of the House, who by this Means, when she came to unlock the Box, would know exactly what her Servants Places were worth, and might the more easily keep the Vail-Money in her own Hands (as I am creditably

bly informed that some do) and regulate the Servants Wages according the Benefactions of the Guests.

If neither of these two Proposals for avoiding the indecent Custom of running the Gauntlet through a Line of Servants, and making them Eye Witnesses that you cannot leave their Master's House without paying the Rrckoning, should be liked; the only one besides I can think of, is, that that such Ladies and Gentlemen whose Servants take Vails should compound with their Visiters, especially with such as come to see them often (after the Manner that many do who live near a Turnpike Gate) and have an Agreement drawn up, that such and such Persons should allow them so much Annually towards the Payment of their Servants Wages (for it is only a pitiful Unwillingness to make an Addition to Wages that prevents Numbers who are convinced of

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of the Detestableness of the Custom of Vail-giving from abolishing it) provided they may go to and from the House without being worried after Dinner by the greedy Domestics; or, if they come to stay a few Days or a Week, without being obliged to leave more Money for their Lodgings, than they would pay if they were to hire a ready furnished House for the same Time, in the politest Part of the Metropolis.

After what has been said of the Indecorum of giving and taking Vails, little need be offered concerning the utter inconsistency of this Custom, with true *English*, and I will add with religious HOSPITALITY; for, however that Word is but too generally abused, and Gluttony and Excess would shelter themselves under its Wing, yet that there is such a Thing as *Hospitality*, and that this Hospitality is an eminent Christian Virtue, I trust none will deny who believe

believe the Epistles of St. Paul to *Timothy* and *Titus* to be divinely inspired: For that Apostle, in laying down the Characteristics of truly Christian Bishops, in the very same Places that he says, such *must be blameless, not self-willed, not soon angry, not given to wine, holy, sober, temperate, lovers of good Men, not given to filthy lucre*; adds also, that they must be LOVERS OF HOSPITALITY; but how such Hospitality can consist with making a poor pious Curate pay for his Dinner, and how any Men pretending to Religion, can so meanly banish this Virtue from their Tables, I confess myself at a loss to discover.

BUT you'll say, what Meanness can there possibly be in giving a Gratuity to another's Servant, or in suffering my own to take one? I answer, there is absolutely just the same Meanness in it, as if you were to make a Bill for your Company's Eating and

Horses, charging each Article of the Feast separately, with so much for Hay and Corn, and to put the Money into your own Pocket without giving your Servant a Penny of it ; or, as if when you dined out, you gave it to the Master of the House, and said, “ Sir, this is for my Dinner.”—Nor is this the least Aggravation of the Matter ; for does not every Master lessen his Servant’s Wages for what his Guests give ? And does he not increase them where his Guests give nothing ? So that in Truth the Money is not given to the Servant, but to the Master, and this meerly for the Meat, Drink and Lodging of the Visiters, as much as at any Public House in *England*, for I suppose that where a Gentleman only calls at a Friend’s House, and does not eat or drink, there he thinks he has no Occasion to pay any thing.—**O BRAVE ENGLISH HOSPITALITY !**

THE third Mischief I propos'd to shew as resulting from the Custom of giving and taking Vails was, that it has already spoiled nine Servants out of ten; I wish I could not say, ninety-nine out of an hundred.

A GOOD Servant, is indeed an invaluable Treasure; and justly deserves the Kindness and Liberality of his Master. But how few such are there to be met with? What is the Cause of the perpetual Complaints we hear now a Days of the Sauciness of Servants? What the Reason of so much chopping and changing between Masters and Servants? — Why truly, for the most Part, Vails and Perquisites. These do not turn out according to the Expectation of the Servant; his Lady does not play so much at Cards, as he hoped she would, or else, perhaps she sets him too hard a Bargain, in making him find the Wax Candles

and Lemonade ; nor does so much Company come to Dinner as he supposed ; therefore he presently gives Warning, and seeks out for a Place where the Lady holds a great many Routs and Balls, and where the Master has a constant Round of his Acquaintance to dine and drink their Bottle.—Now it is in Families of this Sort that the Generality of Servants chuse to live, because Vails run highest ; yet in such Places it is that their Morals must necessarily go worse and worse ; they become insolent, wastful, eye Servants ; bold and impudent to the last Degree ; because, they who push themselves forward with the most Assurance, or that will hide a Gentleman's Hat or Great Coat to prevent him from slipping out unawares, and that they may have the Honour of presenting them to the Owner when he is going away, must always (where Vails are taken) get the most Money ; so that a Man is absolutely unqualified

fied to make the best of his Place, till he has discarded every Spark of Modesty, supposing he brought a few Grains of that rare Commodity with him into the Family. Moreover, it is this dirty, poultry Custom of giving and taking Vails, that emboldens Servants to take upon them to canvass over every Body that comes to the House, how much this, how much the other Gentleman gives, and each Guest acquires throughout the Neighbourhood the false Character of Generous or Covetous, in Proportion as he is more or less lavish in his Favours to Servants. And I wish it could be said, that many a worthy Man who cannot afford to satisfy the Avarice of these greedy Attendants, comes off with the Loss of his Character alone; for I fear it is no uncommon Language among Servants when a Visiter does not pay them according to their Wishes; “ O hang ‘ him a scrubby Rascal; but I’ll take care

“ to

" to throw a Plate of Soup, or a Boat of  
" Butter upon his Cloaths next Time he  
" comes, and to bring him small Beer  
" when he calls for Wine; he may wait  
" long enough for a Plate before I will  
" give him one."—Nay, I have even heard  
of Strangers being put to catch their Death  
in damp Beds, because they did not suf-  
ficiently fee the House Maids; and their  
poor Horses being totaly neglected, because  
they had not wherewithal to ingratiate  
themselves with Mr. Groom\*. These are  
Things that I am credibly informed are fre-  
quently

\* Among these Instances of the Effects of Vail-  
giving, I shall here add the following, which was told  
me by a Person on whose Veracity I can most fully rely :  
A Lady of Quality, whose Name I chuse to conceal,  
having Occasion to make Use of her Coach before the  
Company who dined at the House was broke up, rung  
the Bell several Times to enquire why the Servants did  
not light their Flambeaux, and open the Coach Door;  
still no Servants came, and upon her going out and  
asking the Reason why they made her wait; one of them  
her

quently done in large Families, when the Dependance of Servants is more on their Vails than their stated Wages.—Now, how must Persons who are not in so high a Station of Life be served? As soon as they get a tolerable Servant, and have been at much Pains to qualify him for his Place, that Servant hearing from others how much more Vails are to be got elsewhere, must needs try his Fortune in a large Family, there he too often gets so totally spoiled by the other Servants, and becomes so abominably wicked, as to be absolutely unfit for every Thing, but to practice Dean *Swift's* Directions for Servants, and to follow his Advice for the Behaviour of Footmen at the Place of Execution.

## I

told her with much Effrontry, that “ they only staid “ in Hopes my Lord's Company was going away, “ as it would be hard upon them to lose their Fees.” Whereupon her Ladyship told the Matter to my Lord, and the Men were discharged.

I COME now *fourthly* and *lastly*, to shew that the Custom of giving and taking Vails, has in a Manner totally destroyed that reciprocal Relation between Master and Servant, which is instituted by an Authority not less than Divine. For, on whom does a Servant in a Family where Vails are taken rely for his Subsistence? On his Master? No, but on his Guests; and in Proportion as these increase or diminish their Fees, the Servant is desirous to keep or leave his Place: And how can the Master on his Part expect any Fidelity, or that he shall be served from the least Principle of Love and Gratitude by a Servant, who is perpetually grumbling when the House is not full of Vail-giving Company, and who looks upon himself to be less indebted to his own Master, than to his Master's Guests; and lives with him at such an uncertainty that his staying or going from one Quarter to another,

another, depends meerly upon the Number and Disposition of the Visiters? This Reflection, I think a very material one, for the Prohibition of Vails among serious Persons, who have any Desire to keep up that reciprocal Relation between Master and Servant which God himself has established; and even supposing there should be some Addition in the Expence (which all Things considered is much to be questioned) yet how can any Gentleman of Character, especially such as are influenced by a Sense of Religion, better bestow this Addition than by endeavouring to maintain Decorum in his Family, to save his own and others' Servants from Ruin (instead of laying a Poll-Tax upon his Friends) to keep up *Hospitality* in the true Sense of the Word, and to restore] the long lost reciprocal Relation between Master and Servant? I am sure, be the Difference of the Expence what it will; if Money thus laid out, is not well spent,

I know not what is ; and can only pity those, who from Motives of private Interest, will still persist in a Custom so evidently detrimental to the public Good, and which has long made *poor England* a Proverb for her Meanness, in the Mouth of every Foreigner.

I have nothing more to add, than to conclude with the Account of an Affair which happened to me a few Years ago in *Flanders*. It was to the best of my Remembrance exactly as follows :

As I was Travelling in Company with two more *English* Gentlemen (being benighted) an honest Farmer gave us welcome Access into his hospitable Cot, lodg'd us, and set before us the best his House afforded ; for which in the Morning we press'd him to take some Gratuity, but this he absolutely refused ; and seeing one of the Gentlemen

*to his Friend, &c.*

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lemen offer his Maid some Money, he seem'd to take it amiss, and said, "Sir, I  
" pay my own Servant's Wages."

*I am,*

*Dear Sir,*

*With great Esteem,*

*Your sincere Friend, &c.*

\* \* \* \*